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## COWPER'S *TASK*: A LITERARY MILESTONE

It may be questioned justly if any other British poet, whose work contributed in so important a way to the permanent development of our literature, is now so disregarded as William Cowper. It is probable that no other single poem so largely influential in our letters is so seldom read as *The Task*. Which facts are the more surprising in that we live at a time markedly attentive to the calls of Mother Nature; nature books and studies were never more popular, periodicals dealing with every imaginary phase of country life, as distinct from urban and industrial themes, were never so numerous, and the very slogan of "back to nature" has grown a wearisome commonplace.

It may be that Cowper's rightful position is obscured in our view of the later eighteenth century because of his mightier contemporary, Burns; our affectionate regard for the Highlander may perhaps prevent due recognition of the Lowlander's claims. Yet it is Cowper, not Burns, who is the real bridge between Thomson and Wordsworth. The year 1785 brought out both *The Task* and the Kilmarnock edition of Burns's *Poems*, but it was the former of these which, more than any other book of all that period, showed that English verse had truly stepped forward along the path which was to lead to "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey" and the "Ode on Intimations of Immortality," leaving far behind the cold "classicism" of those earlier bards whose academic methods were best to be described by one himself farthestre moved from them, the young Keats:—

Men were thought wise who could not understand  
His glories; with a puling infant's force  
They swayed about upon a rocking-horse,  
And thought it Pegasus. Ah, dismal soul'd!  
The winds of heaven blew, the ocean roll'd  
Its gathering waves,—yet felt it not. The blue  
Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew  
Of summer nights collected still to make  
The morning precious; beauty was awake!  
Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead

To things you knew not of,—were closely wed  
 To musty laws lined out with wretched rule  
 And compass vile ; so that ye taught a school  
 Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,  
 Till, like the certain wands of Jacob's wit,  
 A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask  
 Of poesy.

The back-swing of the pendulum from this extreme to a sincere expression of natural feeling, which had inevitably to follow, was seemingly delayed by a sort of interregnum in the kingdom of British letters. "The sun, which men had called classic in its glory, had set, though the sky still glowed somewhat coldly with its reflected and failing rays. The other sun of naturalness has not yet risen." Mr. Payne's metaphor is at fault in so far as it suggests night, however. Nothing could be farther from the fact fitly descriptive of a period when Richardson and Smollett and Fielding were forming English fiction; when Gray and Thomson and Chatterton were building English verse; when Burke and Gibbons were contributing to English prose work not since surpassed in its kind; when Goldsmith was creating both the Vicar Primrose and Tony Lumpkin, and Sterne was introducing us to "My Uncle Toby"; and that mighty leviathan of letters, Samuel Johnson, was holding rule over all. Yet this same period, compared with that which was to succeed it, was of secondary importance; a statement especially true of English verse. It was an "Age of Ideas" which linked this literary interim to the Victorian era, falling between 1785 and 1830, to mention two dates more or less arbitrary,—between the publication of Cowper's *Task* and the day when Wordsworth's popularity was at last generally admitted and his influence openly acknowledged.

That suggestive phrase of Leslie Stephens, "Age of Ideas," expresses at once the cause of the movement and its period, when, so far as letters were concerned, the frost of classicism yielded to the spring of a genuine return to nature. The attempts of the Stuart pretenders were events of a well-passed yesterday; the American Revolution was a closed incident; Warren Hastings was being tried; and the French Revolution was rumbling along the horizon, unheeded, if not actually unheard.

Rousseau and Voltaire were attacking orthodoxy, Kant and Lessing and Goethe were at work; Southey was in his Bristol nursery, Scott and Wordsworth were at their youthful studies. It was the era of Reynolds and Gainsborough, Romney and Raeburn, Greuze and Flaxman. Garrick and Mrs. Siddons were acting; Mozart and Haydn composing. It was the noon-day of parliamentary reforms, of the rise of a great middle class. It was a time of broadening education among the people, aided by the appearance of those precursors of the manifold magazines of to-day, the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's*. It was the period of popularized science, of invention, of the growth of factories and factory towns. In every walk of life in England the practical was displacing the artificial, and British letters, mirror-like, began to show everywhere a turning back to "fact" both in description and sentiment. Taine tells the story of M. Roland presenting himself at the court of Louis XVI in plain evening dress, with shoes without buckles, and of the Master of Ceremonies throwing up his hands and exclaiming, like a true Frenchman, "All is lost!" Had he said "All is changed," he would have been less dramatic but his statement would have been more suggestive of the truth of the day. The incident was exactly typical of this "Age of Ideas."

Someone has written that Goldsmith, albeit unconsciously, took the first step in this revolution as it appeared in England when he showed us Dr. Primrose playing the rôle of a *Man of Feeling* in the flesh and making practical a philanthropy which, in Pope's day, would have confined itself to carefully rhymed couplets. It may be so,—but the fact remains that the first radical advance in the right direction was made by William Cowper. He went out of fashion when Sunday traveling came in. We think of him mainly as of mere academic value, leaving him "unvisited, unincensed and unread." Certainly no present-day girl would dream of using his verse as a test of her lover's sensibility, as Miss Austen's Emma did.

Cowper's importance is not to be belittled, however. Much of his poetry was written in a blank verse suggestive of the rhymed pentameters of Pope, and it is often easy to see in the background some unintended influence of that "crooked little

thing who asks questions''; and yet the later poet, who justly blamed Pope for making poetry a merely mechanical art, walked wide of the Popean narrow path, following rather Thomson, who, a decade before, had pointed out just such a poetic highway as this wearer of nightcaps was to inaugurate. But Cowper left Thomson's Arcadian figures out of his landscapes. Hayley, whose life of "Olney's great man" has been long since obsolete (in spite of its vignettes by Blake), saw in his hero "the poet of Christianity, the monitor of the world." We will no longer admit just that; we value him most for that he was in a real sense a literary pioneer. That he was genuinely a humanitarian is admirable; that there sounds in much of his work a note as manly as the greater part of the writer's temperament and life was unmanly is distinctly interesting, but it is of infinitely greater importance that he should have led the way in a true and lasting "return to nature."

"The poet of the domestic circle"—to use a turn of words more aptly descriptive than Hayley's—was born in Hertfordshire, November 26, 1731. His father, a chaplain to George the Second, was of a family "good" enough to boast several justices and at least one Earl; his mother was descended from Dr. John Donne. William was a delicate, sensitive, timid lad, ill-fitted to be thrust out into the world at eight, as he was when he was sent down to Dr. Pitman's school at Market Street. Westminster School followed, and certainly at one (only too probably at both!) he was made the victim of a fagging system whose refined cruelties he was himself to attack in the vigorous, Pompeian *Tirocinium*, thus pointing the way to the later and more potent attacks of Dickens and Tom Hughes. There is no story of the boy better known than that which he tells of being in such mortal terror of his fagmaster as seldom to dare look him in the face, recognizing his presence rather by his shoe buckles and heavy worsted stockings. Such a mental make-up and such a beginning would not suggest success in the law, and yet it was for the legal profession that young Cowper was intended, being called to the bar when twenty-three and living for some dozen years in the Inner Temple, though at that time he seems to have lightened his studies with writing

for the magazines and an occasional trip to the seashore or a visit to the theatre. When his uncle procured for him the appointment as Clerk of the Journals in the House of Peers, and while he was preparing to take his examinations to fill that post, the thought of that "day of execution" as he termed it, so weighed upon him that he went mad and attempted his life.

Augustine Birrell is of the opinion that but for this illness Cowper might have developed into a later Prior or an earlier Praed, for the essayist of *Obiter Dicta* makes much of the unwilling lawyer's deft touch and playful humor in the lighter vein of thought and poetic expression. "He loved a jest," he writes, "a barrel of oysters and a bottle of wine." The letters give ample proof of this but there is little of it in evidence in the poems; the three stanzas of "The Cricket" being a possible (and pleasant) exception, with their note of both of the versifiers whom Mr. Birrell mentions. One might quote, too, in this connection the lawyer-poet's well-known riddle on a kiss, which still stands the completest dictionary of that pledge of love and license. "Cowper from top to toe," says Birrell of it. Is it not, as well, a far echo from the maternal ancestor Donne, he of such curious skill in just such cabalistic posies?—

I am just two and two ; I am warm, I am cold,  
And the parent of numbers that cannot be told.  
I am lawful, unlawful, a duty, a fault,  
I am often sold dear, good for nothing when bought,  
An extraordinary boon, and a matter of course,  
And yielding with pleasure when taken by force.

But Cowper was never to write another "Cupid in Ambush" nor anticipate "The Vicar." That first attack of 1763 was to be followed by two other similar seizures, and the light poesy of those earlier years by the far more important poetry of *The Task*. There is a story that this insanity was induced by the opposition raised to his proposed marriage to his cousin Theodora, and the tale has been quite as emphatically denied. It is certain that the poet was in love with Theodora Jane Cowper, that he wrote reams of verse to her as "Delia," that her father Ashly (who wore a white hat lined with yellow silk, and was on that account likened by his nephew to a mushroom) objected,

and being a stubborn man as well as a little one, he of the fungus simile had his way. It is equally certain that Theodora wore the willow always and, dying unwed, twenty-four years after William, left behind a long-cherished packet of his love letters. It is interesting to know, too, that Theodora's younger sister, Harriet, who later became Lady Hesketh, who was the one that made for the poet those quaint muslin caps which are as much a part of our memories of the man as the hares he tamed or "John Gilpin's" self. The famous portrait by Romney shows one such on the frail-looking subject's head,— and there is the light of madness in the eyes.

After some eighteen months in a private asylum at St. Albans, Cowper, temporarily recovered, went down to Huntingdon, and so (it was then he "got religion") began those long years of intimacy with the Unwins, Mrs. Unwin being the "My Mary" of his poems. At Huntingdon, at Olney, and finally at Weston, Cowper spent the remaining thirty-five years of his life, largely supported by the charity of his relatives, filling quiet weeks with raising pineapples and building rabbit hutches, reading aloud to his two companions or turning "silken thread round ivory reels," and, day after day for twenty years, writing verse. He hated noise and contention but demanded a small and intimate circle of friends, and was himself his own "king of intimate delights, fireside enjoyments, home-born happiness." He sincerely meant—

Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,  
Some boundless contiguity of shade,  
Where rumor of oppression and deceit,  
Of unsuccessful or successful war,  
Might never reach me more!

But that other vignette, self-drawn, is quite as true:—

Now stir the fire, and close the shutter fast,  
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,  
And while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn  
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups  
That cheer but not inebriate wait on each,  
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.

At such a moment most truly was "The bard of the hearth-stone," as the discriminating Sainte-Beuve dubbed him, liter-

ally fulfilling his own best-known line,—“I am monarch of all I survey.”

Cowper's affection for Mrs. Unwin was heart deep, as was her love for him, but it was eminently characteristic of the two and of their intimacy that to the end of her days (she died only four years earlier than he), this motherly guardian angel continued to call him “Mr. Cowper.” His brief affair with Lady Austen was of a somewhat warmer nature; within the week they were “Anne” and “William.” She was pretty and witty, she told him the story of Gilpin and of the loss of the Royal George, and *The Task* was composed at her order, growing out of her demand that a chronicle of “The Sofa” be written. She married a French husband soon after her departure from Olney (1784) and so went out of the poet's life, as may have been best for them both, but English letters, none the less, owes her a debt of gratitude.

Of Cowper's career, if it may be so spoken of, there is little to add. Always self-condemning, and inclined to blackest melancholy,—once even writing that he seemed to himself some dark pool on the surface of which the sun might perchance glisten for a moment, with no chance of ever reaching to the depths,—his last moments amounted to madness again. He died on the twenty-seventh of April, 1800, in his sixty-ninth year.

Of his literary remains it is *The Task* which calls for most notice to-day. Byron spoke of its author as “pious,” and Macaulay wrote that “religion was his Muse,” but this tells no more than half the truth, which stout John Wilson announced more completely when he said that Cowper's “library was the Bible and the Book of Nature.” Burns, too, set to paper quite the same opinion, as when writing of *The Task* he declared it not only “glorious” but compact of a “religion that exalts, that ennobles; the religion of God and Nature.” Surely it is the piece of work most distinctive of the man who produced it. All the world knows *John Gilpin* infinitely better, but the *jeu d'esprit* is as uncharacteristic of Cowper as *An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog* was characteristic of Goldsmith, unique among their verses as both poems were. It is safe to say, too, that



the present day knows more of Cowper's letters than *The Task*, and certainly they are the easiest written and the easiest read, all five volumes of them, of any in the language; everyone has enjoyed them from Southey on,—witty, loving, sensible, set down in the purest of English, with the sweetest of smiles. The *Moral Satires*, suggested by Pope, are little more than religious expositions. Cowper's social judgments, with the fewest exceptions, were passed from the wrong point of view, and these more ambitious ones were as deficient in true philosophy as might have been expected of one who knew next to nothing of the great world beyond his sedan-chair-like summer house, surrounded by its blossoming orchard trees, its pinks and roses and honeysuckles.

*The Task*, on the other hand, is a genuinely great poem, one of the relatively few such, with its undercurrent of didacticism also borne in mind, in all our literature, and especially great in its description of natural scenery. In this sort, indeed, its only true peers are Burns's *Cottar's Saturday Night* and the *Snowbound* of our own Whittier. Cowper "had his eye on his subject," remarked the late Andrew Lang; he saw clearly the actual countryside around and ignored the clipped yews and cropped hedges of Hampton Court inspiration. Southey again caught the inevitable impression, pointing out that here was genuine woodland scenery with formal gardens happily forgot. Written of himself and for himself, to the text "God made the country and man the town," the poem marks a distinct departure from the verse of the Augustan period. There are no Chloes and Strephons here, but real people of flesh and blood: the postman who knocks at the Unwin cottage door is as recognizable and human a fellow as any who punctuates our morning coffee with "news from India." In *The Task* are no landscapes imported from Holland or Italy, but true English lanes and meadowlands, sharp in outline, finished in detail. The least happening is enough to suggest some such picture; a buxom country lass, a loaded wain rumbling behind the sweating horses and between dusty hedgerows, a streamlet chuckling along over the blue pebbles,—these and a hundred other similar trifles suggest to the man the canvas which a prosy world

sees only when such as he lifts the cloth that covers it. He was as keenly alive to rural sounds, also, as he was to rural sights; the Milton of *L'Allegro* did not catch more clearly the plowman's whistle two fields off, or the rasp of the whetstone on the scythe blade, or the subdued conversation of barnyard fowls. Finally, Cowper's country seldom sets him moralizing; it is just plain country, *real* country!

Take, almost at random, these few lines from Book V, "The Winter's Morning Walk":—

The slanting ray  
Slides ineffectual down the snowy vale,  
And, tingeing all with its own rosy hue,  
From every herb and every spiry blade  
Stretches a length of shadow o'er the field.

The verdure of the plain lies buried deep  
Beneath the dazzling deluge; and the bents,  
And coarser grass, upspearing o'er the rest,  
Of late unsightly and unseen, now shine  
Conspicuous and in bright apparel clad,  
And, fledged with icy feathers, nod superb.

Shaggy and lean and shrewd, with pointed ears,  
And tail cropped short, half lurcher and half cur,  
His dog attends him. Close behind his heel  
Now creeps he slow; and now with many a frisk  
Wide-scampering, snatches up the drifted snow  
With ivory teeth, or plows it with his snout;  
Then shakes his powdered coat, and barks for joy.

The sparrows peep, and quit the sheltering eaves  
To seize the fair occasion. Well they eye  
The scattered grain, and, thievishly resolved  
To escape the impending famine, often scared  
As oft return, a pert voracious kind.

Here is no such "return to nature" as was to be found in Wordsworth, but if Cowper did not see *into* nature as did that later, greater master, yet here is amplest proof that he saw nature. It was more than had been done by his predecessors for a full hundred and fifty years.

Burns loved *The Task*. Jowett was brought up on the poem. Hazlitt wrote of it: "With its pictures of domestic comfort and social refinement, it can hardly be forgotten but with the

language itself." It enjoyed an immense popularity for twenty years and more after its appearance, and even when in the eyes of the early nineteenth-century world it was eclipsed by Scott's northern troopers and Byron's romantic pirates, hundreds of the sober, reliable, middle-class Englishmen yet read the book by their firesides for a century more. Was it not the vivacious Marianne Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility*, who found it so hard to choose between the rival charms of Cowper and Walter Scott?

To us to-day *The Task* is most valuable because in it we see that poetry has again become lifelike. Here are emotions, not mere words. It may lack passion and vitality, but there is no least trace of "classic" affectation in its lines. Certainly it does not betoken a fiery talent, but as surely does it show a talent pure and tender and genuine, the talent of a man who was possessed of an observing eye; a man of personal charm, sweet and human, interested and interesting.

WARWICK JAMES PRICE.

Philadelphia, Pa.